

A Way to Improve All Facets of English Language Learning

By Yoshio Okita

Here is a project of practical use for each of your students. It is designed for high school or college students not only to improve their communicative and cultural competencies but to come closer to fulfilling their long-cherished dream of visiting some “wonderland.” It is student-centered and can be incorporated in an English language class of any size.

English textbooks offer a variety of opportunities for students to learn about places of scenic beauty or historical, cultural, or architectural interest in the English-speaking world.

Naturally students dream about visiting some of these places for entertainment and cultural or educational experiences. The following is a series of tasks I assigned to my students at a senior high school. They were quite enthusiastic about working on the project, which provided fresh impetus for using English.

Preparation:

First, try to obtain a map of the U.S. from a local travel agency or tourist development organization. The map of the U.S. produced by the U.S. Department of Commerce and United States Travel Service, for example, has a list of names and addresses of the national parks and monuments, including those in the states of Alaska and Hawaii, administered by the National Park Service (Altogether there are nearly 200 of them).

On the list there are usually a number of national parks or monuments your students are familiar with. This is no surprise because, together with the teaching materials used at school, students come to know of those places through a wide range of mass media.

First Step:

Have your students take a close look at the list and tell you how many names of the places on the list they have heard of or know about, and which three they want to visit. Then have those students who wish to visit the same national park or monument form into groups (no more than four students in a group). At this stage, you will be surprised to find that students have far more knowledge of places on the list than you imagined. I once planned this project team teaching with an assistant English teacher from the USA, who had never heard of some of the places my students picked. One of those places was the Petrified National Forest in the state of Arizona. Some science-minded students were familiar with the name from their earth science class and were keen to go there.

Second Step:

Have each group write to the national park or monument they want to visit for a complimentary map and all the other necessary information for a brief visit—i.e., the transportation facilities available from the nearest city, some of the major features and attractions, leisure facilities, etc. But make sure to tell them to enclose an International Reply Coupon for the return postage, which is obtainable at a city post office at nominal charge. From my experience, answers will come in a month or so. In most cases the National Park Agency sends a colorful map and a brochure with all the necessary practical data for a visit. Sometimes they even send a booklet or the state map where it is located.

For many of my students, this assignment was their first opportunity to write a letter in English and send it by air mail. (If that is the case with your students, they may wish to follow the teacher's model.) You can easily imagine how excited they were when they received a sizable envelope addressed to them all the way from the United States. Quite often the envelope says something to the effect that it is made from recycled paper—something still very rare in many countries—and this may be new cultural information for the students.

Third Step:

When the students receive an answer, have them prepare for presentation an imaginary itinerary for a visit, making full use of the park facilities. You may allow them to use an opaque projector for the presentation because the brochures are usually too small for everyone to see. If you do not have one, you might ask your students to produce a large illustrated picture. They like this kind of work, and you will be amazed at their creative and imaginative workmanship. If it happens that some of the language in the brochure is difficult for your students to understand, step in to help.

Fourth Step:

After all the presentations are over, keep the maps, brochures, and illustrated drawings for display at a school festival or in the school library so that all students at your school can learn something from them.

Options: You can contact the embassy for a list of visitors' bureau offices run by the state governments and have your students contact some offices. Or you may want to refer them to other embassies for the same purpose.

To Conclude:

Critics may argue that the fatal weakness of an activity like this is that it tends to heighten the “royal visit” image of the country. But the point is that it helps bring an awareness of the use of English as a tool to widen the horizon of the world. This benefit more than makes up for any disadvantages.

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